

Inclusive education for all: Steps to ensure equal access to special education services for students with autism spectrum disorders

Dear Editor,

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, around 1 in 36 children has been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).^[1] Children with ASD often have unique learning needs that require specialized education services. The aim of this letter is to highlight the importance of special education for autistic children and provide evidence-based recommendations to reduce inequality in using special education services (SES) among children with ASD.

SEs are designed to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities, including those with ASD. These services provide individualized instruction, support services, therapies, and accommodations to help students with ASD succeed educationally and socially. Research shows that special education interventions can have a positive impact on the academic, social, and emotional development of autistic children. A study by Odom *et al.*^[2] indicated that specialized education programs for autistic children were associated with improved academic outcomes.

SES for autistic children can help them develop life skills that are essential for independent living as they grow older. This can include skills such as communication, self-care, and problem-solving. By providing early intervention and support, SES can have a positive impact on health behaviors and life skills for children with ASD.^[3]

Special education programs for autistic children also provide opportunities for social interactions and skills development. Autistic children often struggle with social communication and interaction, and SES can provide a supportive environment to practice these skills.

Studies demonstrated that SES can differ by demographic characteristics and disability severity for children with ASD.^[2,4] A study by Wei *et al.*^[3] indicated that elementary-school students with ASD were more likely to receive adaptive physical education, special transportation, and specialized computer software or

hardware, but less likely to receive mental health or social work services than their secondary-school counterparts.

Socioeconomic factors have been found to be a significant contributor to disparities in using special education among individuals with ASD. Studies indicate low-income and nonwhite children are less likely to receive early autism-specific interventions during critical developmental periods.^[5] Apart from socioeconomic factors, healthcare-related factors can contribute to disparities in access to early intervention services as well. These include discrimination in interactions, clinical bias in diagnosis, insufficient health-care providers and physical resources, and geographical barriers.

Providing effective SES for autistic children in low-income countries can be challenging due to limited resources and infrastructure. However, the present study provides substantial evidence-based recommendations that can be implemented to improve the quality of care for children with ASD:

- Improving awareness and understanding of autism among parents, teachers, and health-care providers is key to improving access to care
- Developing culturally appropriate assessment tools that are sensitive to the local context can help to identify children with autism and determine their specific needs. This can be done through collaboration between local experts and international organizations
- Providing training and support for teachers is essential to ensure that they have the knowledge and skills to work with autistic children. This can include training on evidence-based interventions, behavior management strategies, and communication techniques
- Implementing evidence-based interventions, such as applied behavior analysis and picture exchange communication system
- Establishing support networks for parents to reduce the stress and burden of caring for a child with autism. This can include support groups, parent training programs, and respite care services
- Strengthening health-care infrastructure such as increasing the number of health-care providers and improving equitable access to health-care facilities
- Collaboration and coordination between local stakeholders, international organizations, and governments.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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Submitted: 19-Jul-2023; **Revised:** 04-Nov-2023;

Accepted: 27-Dec-2023; **Published:** 11-Jul-2024

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DOI:

10.4103/jrms.jrms_471_23

How to cite this article: Saadatnia M, Karamimatin B, Soltani S. Inclusive education for all: Steps to ensure equal access to special education services for students with autism spectrum disorders. *J Res Med Sci* 2024;29:30.

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